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ABSTRACT

Children with high self-esteem tend to do better in school. Studies indicate, however, that self-esteem is not a cause of academic success, but an effect. In this review of five recent research studies on the subject of self-esteem, one example of a successful program aimed at raising students' self-esteem is offered by Scarborough school system in Ontario, Canada. In two other studies, coming from different perspectives, Martin Covington and Jerry Conrath independently conclude that the best way for a child to sustain confidence is to acquire and demonstrate competence. In a comprehensive review of self-esteem enhancement programs, Mary Ann Scheirer and Robert Kraut reinforce this conclusion. The fifth entry raises questions of value and motivation that are often ignored, suggesting that self-esteem is necessary, but not sufficient, for achievement, and that students need to see the value of education for themselves. (Author/TE)

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William J. Holly

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Students' Self-Esteem and Academic Achievement

William J. Holly

Children with high self-esteem tend to do better in school. But does self-esteem cause their academic success? The best research today strongly indicates that it does not, thereby punching a large hole in the notion that enhancing student self- esteem is a key to academic excellence.

Cross-lag correlational studies indicate that self-esteem is not a *cause* of academic success but an effect. Increases in self-esteem usually are preceded by gains in competence.

Since school is such a major part of children's lives, academic success or failure inevitably has a major impact on their feelings about themselves. Besides, the best evidence children can have for the level of their ability or competence is how well they have fared in the classroom. Nevertheless, although self-esteem does not cause academic success, there is ample reason to believe that it can contribute to it—in three ways:

First, studies show that feeling worthless can be depressing, and depression can inhibit performance. Second, fear of failure can lead students to hold back, whereas those with greater self-esteem and self-confidence may be more willing to take up the challenge.

Finally, constant failure and the accompanying feelings of incompetence tend to be discouraging and demoralizing. For students who are convinced that they lack the ability to succeed, it doesn't make much sense to even try.

The fact that students with high self-esteem are more likely to succeed does not mean, however, that their self-esteem is the source of their motivation. Self-esteem and confidence only make it appear safe and reasonable to try if one cares to. These qualities do not in themselves provide a motive to do anything. Students who feel competent to do their schoolwork still might not want to do it.

Furthermore, even granting self-confidence a role in increasing students' chances of success, the fact remains that the predominant cause of that self-confidence is previous attainment. In short, nothing breeds success like success. So, perhaps we should concentrate on building students' competence, and let their self-esteem and self-confidence follow naturally.

In this review of five recent research studies bearing on the subject, one example of a successful program aimed at raising students' self-esteem is offered by the Scarborough school system in Ontario, Canada. Marilyn Wideman reports which methods are perceived as being most useful.

In two other studies, coming from two different perspectives, Martin Covington and Jerry Conrath independently conclude that the best way for a child to sustain a sense of confidence is to acquire and demonstrate competence. Then in a comprehensive review of self-esteem enhancement programs, Mary Ann Scheirer and Robert Kraut reinforce this conclusion.

The fifth entry raises questions of value and motivation that too often are ignored. What will motivate students to greater achievement once they have attained self-esteem? What will keep them from falling into self-satisfied complacency? Building on a suggestion made by Conrath, William J. Holly argues that students need to see the value of education for themselves. Those who do will not need the further motive of enhancing their self-esteem.

Fostering self-esteem is not the primary objective of education. Our more central concern is that students should become the best that they can be in the pursuit of those things most worth doing. It will then follow naturally that they come to feel better about themselves, and more at ease with their role in society.

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1 **Wideman, Marilyn E.** *An Evaluation of Student Self-Esteem in Scarborough Schools.* June 1982. 132 pages. ED 265 463.

Enhancing students' self esteem is a priority in the Scarborough school system. The stated rationale for this emphasis is the proposition that self-esteem has been observed to be a better predictor of academic success than intelligence. Wideman's report, however, does not say whether Scarborough's success in raising students' self-esteem has resulted in higher achievement scores. For those interested to know how self-esteem is measured, the complete Piers-Harris Self-Concept Inventory is reproduced in an appendix.

Wideman reports that Scarborough has succeeded in raising student self-esteem in grades 3, 6, and 8. Sixth graders, for example, average 61.2 out of 80 on the Piers-Harris scale, as compared to a base line of 57.7 established five years earlier. Increases in grades 3 and 8 are comparable, whereas those in grade 10 were less satisfactory.

Which teaching methods do students feel are most important? Wideman found that placing trust in students, taking time to explain things, and saying nice things about their work placed in the top five in all grades. She then ran a regressional analysis on her data to determine which of the methods approved by students are most related to self-esteem.

The methods most related to self-esteem in the third grade are identified as being nice to students, letting them help with classroom rules, and understanding how they feel. In grade 6, it is most important to show interest in things they can do outside the classroom. Eighth graders want to be given work they can do well.

Here are methods that teachers feel are most useful: listen to students, show that you care, make positive comments, be a positive role model, and discourage negative remarks from one student to another. Teachers also feel it is crucial to let students know that you trust them and to relay positive comments about them to their parents.

Tenth graders, who are generally lower in self-esteem, complained that their work is often too difficult and that teachers don't understand how they feel. Students in most grades agree that teachers don't say enough nice things about their work.

2 **Covington, Martin V.** "The Self-Worth Theory of Achievement Motivation: Findings and Implications." *The Elementary School Journal* 85, 1 (1984): 5-21.

What role does self-esteem play in motivating students to achieve? Self-worth theory, as explained by Covington, is a "drive-model" concept. According to this view, self-esteem in itself does not cause students to do anything at all. Rather, what motivates students to achieve is the desire to preserve the self-esteem they already possess and to acquire more.

One would thus expect that students with the lowest self-esteem would be the most driven to achieve and to prove themselves. But Covington notes that students can be caught in a bind between ardently desiring more success and just as ardently fearing failure. Thus they may decline even to try, fearing that failure will demonstrate their incompetence for all to see.

Covington's research indicates that such a no-effort approach is less likely to occur in the primary grades, the reason being that younger students are very susceptible to the work ethic; they do not yet realize that people differ in the ability to succeed through effort. As one child put it, "Smart kids try; dumb ones don't." Thus it is easier for them to find their self-worth in effort. Older students, on the other hand, tend to define their worth in terms of innate ability, seeing it as the primary and inevitable determinant of success, no matter what the effort.

Although older students may be right that ability is the most important factor in success, the no-effort strategy does not serve them well. As Covington notes, it brings censure and blame for not trying. And it obviates the chances for further successes that might enhance their self-esteem.

Covington would stress that self-improvement and pride in a job well done are themselves important definitions of success, that native talents and abilities can be made brilliant through extended effort, and that people cannot know the boundaries of their talents until they test them.

Covington says one way to block the no-effort strategy is to stress the importance of cooperation over competition and of effort over ability as sources of personal worth, and he recommends two approaches. The first is cooperative learning, in which students take responsibility for teaching parts of a joint assignment to members of their team; thus they learn the rewards of helping rather than competing.

Second is contract and mastery learning, in which students are

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helped to set realistic goals and to learn how to interpret failures constructively. Appropriate time is allowed for attaining a given level of mastery or competence. Such emphasis on effort diminishes the perceived importance of ability.

3 Conrath, Jerry. *Our Other Youth: Handbook of Guidelines for Teachers and Other Adults Who Work with at Risk Kids and Discouraged or Defeated Learners.* Published by the author, 1986. 42 pages. ED 278 153.

Conrath is a consultant who works with children who are discouraged or feel they have been defeated—children who have a deep sense of personal impotency, helplessness, and lack of self-worth. They describe themselves as not belonging and as being lazy, unable to do their work, slow, dumb, disruptive, and irresponsible. In short, their self-esteem is very, very low.

These children also have two other chacteristics related to low self-esteem. They distrust adults, adult institutions, and authority in general, often blaming others for their failure. And they see the world as something happening to them, outside their control and responsibility. In locus-of-control studies, such children are termed externalizers. Conrath wants to turn them into internalizers who have confidence in themselves and feel in control of their lives. They would then accept responsibility for their actions. Further, they would accept their own authority and act on the basis of their own values, for their own purposes.

Conrath's fundamental recipe for enhancing self-esteem divides into two basic parts: gaining confidence in one's ability and gaining confidence in one's values.

According to Conrath, self-confidence and a sense of control over one's life will develop with success in skill development and learning. After all, he notes, nothing justifies a feeling of competence more than having actually demonstrated competence. So, the answer is to help students set meaningful goals that they can attain. When they do succeed, point out the relationship between their effort and their accomplishment, and insist that they take credit and feel pride. Seeing that the world is indeed under their control, the students will feel self-confident and see themselves as being responsible for their lives.

Once students have attained self-confidence, Conrath asks, what will make them actually want to achieve academically? Once their self-esteem is high, what reason can they have for further striving? These questions lead to the second and perhaps more profound part of Conrath's recipe for strengthening self-esteem:

Students need to internalize the values that make education desirable. To help them do so, teachers and administrators must clarify the purpose, value, utility, and relevance of things they ask students to learn and do. The answer does not lie in such rewards as money, trinkets, and high grades; these focus on the external reasons for doing schoolwork and may actually retard durable learning. Besides, says Conrath, such rewards are patronizing. Instead, give students the real, adult reasons for learning.

Those who know the simple joys of learning and who can see the worth of education for themselves, he says, already have the most telling possible motives for learning. Moreover, having internalized the best values of their culture, they will see the world as being ordered by values they respect.

4 Scheirer, Mary Ann and Robert E. Kraut. Increasing Educational Achievement Via Self-Concept Change." *Review of Educational Research* 49, 1 (Winter 1979): 131-50.

There is a long tradition in individualistic American philosophy and psychology that stresses the importance of knowing oneself, believing in oneself, and striving for excellence. So, when research began to confirm that children with high self-esteem tend to do better in school, many educators rushed to the conclusion that enhancing self-esteem is the key to academic success.

Scheirer and Kraut note that these early studies have come in for some well-deserved criticism. The definitions and measurements of self-esteem were inadequate, experimental design was often flawed, and studies often contradicted one other. Moreover, these were merely cross-correlational studies. They may have established that self-esteem is associated with achievement, but failed to demonstrate a causal relationship between the two.

Nonetheless, a vast number of educational programs have been founded on the belief that self-esteem does promote achievement. Scheirer and Kraut examined the evidence available in these studies to answer whether it is reasonable to believe that a causal relationship may exist. They selected only studies that conform to standard criteria for experimental design. The results were not encouraging.

Several of the reviewed programs did succeed in raising either self-esteem or achievement levels, but seldom were both raised in the same program. In the few cases where both achievement and self-esteem were raised, it seemed clear that achievement preceded and caused the rise in self-esteem. This reverse finding was confirmed by studies that employed cross-lag correlations to determine the direction of cause, if any.

One massive research effort studied the open school approach that stresses self-esteem as a prerequisite to learning. It found that traditional "basic skills" programs included in the study were more effective both in raising achievement levels and in raising self-esteem.

Another program was designed to reduce delinquency by enhancing self-esteem. After fifteen years, the program was found to have had no effect either on self-esteem or

academic competence, or on delinquency. Interestingly, both instructors and student participants were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the program. They thought it was working fine, despite its objectively measured failure.

There is some evidence from one program that student self-esteem can be raised through parental involvement. The effects noted were not long-lasting, however, and it appeared likely that the rise in self-esteem resulted from classroom achievement reinforced by parental approval.

Scheirer and Kraut conclude that the evidence that self-esteem causes academic achievement is overwhelmingly negative. It appears more likely that self-esteem is caused simply by superior performance. They feel that this finding should make educators far more cautious about the relationship between achievement and self-esteem and not be misguided by a distorted view of the latter's importance.

5 **Holly, William J.** *Self-Esteem: Does It Contribute to Students' Academic Success?* Eugene: Oregon School Study Council, University of Oregon, October 1987.

That children with high self-esteem usually are more competent does not mean that self-esteem causes their competence. It is equally reasonable to believe that these children feel good about themselves because they have been successful in school. Recent research tends to confirm this belief, showing that increases in self-esteem usually are preceded by successes.

Theory reinforces this view in two ways. First, the best evidence people can have of their competence is success at something. So, if we want our children to feel assured and self-confident, perhaps we should concentrate on helping them acquire competencies that will enable them to succeed. Second, self-confidence alone cannot cause achievement, since it provides no motive for achievement.

The motive for any behavior lies in its perceived value. If students are assigned tasks that they regard as meaningless and without value, the act of completing those tasks is not likely to raise their self-esteem. On the other hand, for students who can see for themselves the value of what they are asked to learn, the notion that success will raise their self-esteem is essentially irrelevant.

Holly concludes that the most reliable route to a healthy sense of self-esteem is to forget about self-esteem as a goal and simply to focus on being the best that one can be in the pursuit of those things most worth doing. This is not to deny that confidence in one's ability and values can contribute to success. Self-confidence can indeed be useful. But the most solid foundation for confidence in one's ability is demonstrated competence.

Moreover, confidence in one's ability does not in itself provide a motive to do anything at all. It is possible for students who do not share the school's values to feel good about themselves without giving any thought to academic success. The more meaningful goal of education is not that students esteem themselves but that they become worthy of the esteem of their fellow citizens.

Some critics have worried that self-esteem enhancement programs might produce students with inflated egos— unrealistic, selfish, and incompetent. In his interviews, Holly found that most teachers are aware of this danger. They stress the importance of having a realistic self-image, of being responsible, and of accepting the worth and value of others. In general, teachers seem to have anticipated the research findings, for most teach that self-esteem arises from hard work and personal effort.

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